CHARLES JAMES FERN

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Charles James Fern

(1892 -)

Mr. Fern is the retired editor and general manager of the Garden Island, a news weekly on Kauai. He was a pilot with the U.S. Air Force in World War I and brought barnstorming and the first commercial airplane to Hawaii in 1919. During World War II he was director of Kauai's Civil Defense unit.

Mr. Fern talks of the growth of the newspaper and some of the controversial issues dealt with in his editorial column. Among these are the birth of the ILWU, practices of the sugar plantations and Kauai's special brand of politics. He also shares some amusing anecdotes of World War II and it's effect on Hawaii's communication network.

Lynda Mair, Interviewer

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES JAMES FERN

At his Arcadia apartment, 1434 Punahou Street, Honolulu 96822

September 1971

F: Charles James Fern

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

M: I was reading about you in the Men and Women of Hawaii [1966 publication, edited by Gwenfread E. Allen] and it said you were born in Madison Barracks, [New York] which sounded kind of interesting.

F: Well, my father [Arthur Stephen Fern] was in the army, see, so I was born on an army post. Madison Barracks is an army post on the Canadian border. It's a relic of the War of 1812 or something else like that. My father was stationed there and that's how I happened to be born there.

Then we went from there to Texas and from Texas back to New York--Staten Island in New York. He was transferred around and then he went to the Philippines. This was back in the 1900's. He went to the Philippines and when he came back from the Philippines he was sent to Arizona. They had a post near Prescott, Arizona. Then from there he went to San Francisco. Then he retired in San Francisco and in retirement we moved over to Oakland. We lived in Oakland and I actually grew up in Oakland.

M: Oh, I see. Did you go with him on these different trips?

F: I didn't go to the Philippines. We stayed in New York when he went to the Philippines and then joined him. He was over there two years and then we joined him in Arizona when he came back from the Philippines. That was from 1900 to 1902. It was right after the Spanish-American War.

M: I see. So you actually grew up in Oakland, California.

F: Yes, that's right. I got there about the age of twelve or something like that. I grew up there and went to school there. Then I went to Berkeley, University of California. I was in Berkeley when World War I started and I went into the air force.

M: So before you completed school?

F: Yes. I was in college at the time and I went into the air force. Then I never went back to college. My class was the class of 1918. I went in [to the air force] in 1917 and I didn't get out until 1919. Then I went back and took a look at it: I'd been flying and sort of wanted to continue flying and I wasn't too much interested in college so I didn't finish my last year.

M: What were you majoring in in college?

F: I was majoring in business.

M: Had your interest in journalism developed at all at that point?

F: No, not too much. I had done some in high school and I did a little when I went to college in Berkeley. I worked afternoons in the open playground department. I worked my way through college by working in the playground department. It was a thing that they had set up there. They took advantage of the university, you see, to take college students and you worked from three in the afternoon till five or six according to the season of the year and you worked all day Saturdays. And we got fifty dollars a month for that. And in those days, fifty dollars a month could take you through college. It wouldn't even get you started now. (laughter)

M: That's for sure.

F: At least it would help a lot as far as--you could live in a fraternity house for forty dollars a month, you see, so your family didn't have to come through with too much help. It was a big supplement to whatever your family was giving you.

M: What rank did your father have when he retired?

F: My father was what is known today as a quartermaster sergeant; they called them commissary sergeants in those days. He was in the Quartermaster Corps, only in those days they had a commissary corps which handled all the food and the quartermasters handled all the other supplies. Then they combined the two of them and made him a quartermaster private. He retired as a quartermaster sergeant.

M: I see. Okay then, what happened after 1919?

F: Well, in 1919 I went back to Berkeley. I went back home,

you see, and was looking at going back to college. I hadn't made up my mind; I didn't know what I wanted to do, frankly. I was going back to college and there was a fraternity brother there who'd been in the air force. You see, I went in the air force and got my commission and I instructed at San Diego. I was teaching at San Diego when the war ended in 1918. Then I was discharged in 1919. So I went back to see what I could do. When I went to work when I first got back, college had already started, so I went to work in a shipyard. They were still building ships for the war and I went to work there. Then I was going back to college when college resumed.

I had a fraternity brother who had quite a bit of money. His family had quite a bit and he had quite a bit. He had been in the air corps but he had not learned to fly. The war ended before he got any flying training. So we were sitting around in the fraternity house one day and he said, "If I buy a plane, will you teach me to fly?" I said, "Sure, I'll teach you to fly." So we went up to Sacramento where I'd done my primary training. We went up there and looked over some planes up there. It just happened that there were still some officers there that I had known when I was a cadet. We spoke to them and they did a very good job. They gave us a brand new plane. In most cases they were selling the second-hand ones, if you get my point, but they gave us a brand new one right out of the box. We bought it and flew it down to San Francisco where there was a small private field right adjoining a golf course and we took it down there. We'd made arrangements beforehand.

Then I started to teach this fellow to fly but the facilities at this place were no good at all for him. The air was too rough and the field was too short. You had to be experienced to get in and out, never mind taking any lessons. (chuckles) So we went out in the country someplace. I think we went up near San Rafael where we heard there was a sort of a field and I started teaching him there.

We found out they were barnstorming then, if you know what barnstorming is. After World War I a lot of people bought these surplus planes and they went around the country from town to town, flying in an impromptu field and charging so much a ride. Because it was out in the country they called them barnstormers after the old theatrical people. So they were known as barnstormers and that's what they're known as today.

So we decided to do some barnstorming then, too, to make a little money. And every place we went, somebody'd been there ahead of us (Lynda laughs), see, taking the cream off the top. So we were talking about it one day and we wondered, "Let's find some place where nobody's

ever been." So we got out an atlas of the U.S., you see, and here down in the southwest was Hawaii. And we had a fraternity brother down here at the time, living here. He had been in college and he was working down here for Honolulu Iron Works. So we wired him, "Has anybody ever been there with a plane?" and also, "Is there a place to fly if we brought one in?" He wired nobody'd ever been here and he also wired yes, he was a little bit optimistic. (both chuckle)

So we put the plane on a boat and with that much information we came down here. And then we set up--it was a little difficult--we set up in Kapiolani Park. In those days Kapiolani Park from the Shell to the fountain--do you know the fountain at the lower end there? That was a race track and polo field, so it was wide open, you see. We could take off and land there. We got permission from the city--well, we got permission from the Polo Club--to fly out of there; they had a lease with the city on the race track and the polo field. But then we used that as a base, you see. [the Shell: Waikiki Shell]

Then we flew out of there and we did very well financially. And then we went to the other islands. We ended up on Kauai and I decided to stay there. That's how I got here.

M: I talked to someone, on the book I just finished, who told me about going for airplane rides in Kapiolani Park. (laughter)

F: Oh, well I was the pilot!

M: Yeh. (laughter)

F: Then from there we were going to fly again. We milked Kauai dry as far as customers were concerned.

In those days there was a very high sugar bonus. Sugar plantations in those days would give regular daily wages and then they would give a profit-sharing bonus to the employees and they held some of it back. It was a monthly deal on the price of sugar that month. But they held back twenty-five percent of it to keep them [the workers] to finish the crop. Some of these people would get to making big money and would decide to go spend it. So they held back this twenty-five percent. You had to be working on the plantation at the end of the crop in November to collect your final twenty-five percent. If you hadn't finished out the year with them, you see, or finished out the crop, you didn't get it.

So what we were going to do, we were going to take down the ship--this was in July--we were going to take down the ship and then start flying again in November. So

I flew it over. I got a job on one plantation and my partner got a job on another. He'd been in the cattle business so he went to work in the cattle division on one of the plantations, running it for them. And our mechanic went to work in their shop as an automotive mechanic. Then we were going to start again in November.

So I flew the plane over there and left it. Meanwhile I'd taught this fellow to fly so he could fly; he had that. They were supposed to take it down and store it until November and then we'd put it back together again. Well, they let it sit out in the weather at Kilauea which is a very wet spot in these islands. The wings of the plane deteriorated to such an extent it wasn't flyable. So I never went back to flying.

M: And that was the end of your . . .

F: That was the end of it as far as I was concerned. Then I worked on this plantation. And then I went to work for the newspaper there.

M: What plantation was it?

F: It was Makee [Sugar Company, Kealia, Kauai]. It's no longer in existence; it's part of Lihue Plantation now. It's been merged since that time with Lihue.

M: How do you spell Makee?

F: M-A-K-double-E. It was formed by a Captain [James] Makee and King Kalakaua. Makee was the founder of Ulupalakua Ranch [also known as the Rose Ranch] over on Maui. He was a sea captain who became ill here and had to leave his ship, see, and he stayed. Then he married a local gal and then--I don't know if this was her property or what--then he went into the sugar business with King Kalakaua on Kauai. The king had this land there, it was the king's land, and between them they set up this plantation. Then Kalakaua dropped out of it [King Kalakaua held a quarter interest in the plantation] because Makee bought him out or something.

Then he had a son-in-law with him who took it over after his death. But it was known as Makee Plantation; it was named after him. He was quite a character here in Hawaii. He was one of the first big cattlemen that started ranching and things of that kind. And his ranch is still over there--Ulupalakua Ranch on Maui.

I worked there for a while and then I went to work for the newspaper. I had only done some writing in high school. I'd been the sports reporter for the newspaper, you see. We had a little school paper of our own but I wrote for the

Oakland Tribune, you see. Just little short sports items: we played somebody and beat them or lost or tied them in the little local league that they had. I had that experience. Then when I went to Berkeley I sort of freelanced for them, more or less just little humorous items. It wasn't a column exactly. But if I heard something funny or something I would contribute it. That was the extent of my experience. I did have the little bit of training from my sportswriting, you see. Then from there I . . .

M: Did you just go looking for a job?

F: Well, no. What happened [was] I was living on this plantation, you see, and there wasn't much to do so I started writing for the local newspaper that I eventually joined. I wrote a column from there. It was completely fictitious except we used real names on the basis that it was a report from Makee, you see what I mean. Kealia was the name of the town and I set up a mayor and a city council and everything else (Lynda chuckles)--all real characters but completely fictitious as far as operations were concerned. So we had the chief of police who lived there. The mayor was the assistant manager of the store (chuckles); then the chief of police was somebody; the chief of the fire department was somebody. We had a city council and everything else like that. We sort of paralleled what was going on in our own board of supervisors, sort of satirically. They had the same problems, you see; the council had the same problems. It was purely humorous and purely fictitious except that I used real names. And they got a big bang out of it too.

M: And what was the paper that this was published in?

F: The Garden Island, the one that I eventually joined. And then what happened on that was, I went in to see him [the editor]--I used to go in and take my copy in and go in and see him--then I did write real news notes too, you see. In this column there would be real news notes but there'd also be the city council meeting or there was a fire or something else like that. It was all gags, you see.

One of the stories was that the fire department was called out and when they went to the fire they didn't have any nozzles on their hoses. And it developed that the fire chief's wife was having a party so she took the nozzles as vases for her flowers. (laughter) Just gags like that.

So I went in to see him one time and I told him he had a very poor sports page. And my forte had been sportswriting, you know. And he said, "Well, what can you do?" He asked me if I'd take it over. So while I was still working on the plantation I took over the sports page too and helped

him on that. Then from that they finally decided they needed a full-time editor or full-time writer so I was offered the job.

M: Who was the editor and the head of the paper then?

F: A man named Hopper, K.C. Hopper. He left the islands in 1929; he retired and went to the mainland.

M: Had he just come from the mainland?

F: No. He had worked for the [Honolulu] Advertiser and then he went up there as the shop man--as the superintendent of the plant. The editor ran the paper; the editor was the manager at the time. The editor got into a lot of problems there and so they fired him and made this man [Mr. Hopper] the manager. But he had little or no editorial experience at all so he was in a bind that way.

I went to work for him and I did everything. It was a small eight-page paper and I did most of the straight news and part of the sports. We set up a little sports staff of part-timers writing from different areas because one man couldn't cover the whole island. On Sunday there'd be five or six baseball games and there was a big league with ten teams or something like that. That was the highlight of the sports interest. So we'd have a writer in each community. Then I'd take it [their stories] and edit the copy.

Then from there he decided to retire and I was made manager and I eventually got control of it. He had a pretty good block of stock and I got some of his stock. Then as stock came on the market, I bought it until I had control of it. I never owned it outright, one-hundred percent, but I had well over fifty percent of the stock.

M: How many employees did it actually have?

F: Well, when we started out we had about, oh, let me figure it out. Besides the manager and his wife, who was the bookkeeper when I joined them, there were about six employees I would say, including myself.

M: How many of those were actually writing?

F: I was the only writer. Actually he used to write the news along with other things too but he never had time enough to get any news in the paper, he had so many other things to do. When I came in, I did all the writing of the hard news, you see. His wife took care--along with her bookkeeping, she took care of social events and things like that. But we didn't cover it very well. In fact, the pa-

per wasn't much of a newspaper, due to lack of sales I know. He was trying to do too much. Then when he brought me in I was able to expand the news side of it and we were able to turn out a much better paper as a result. I was full-time. Well, I wasn't full-time because I was also advertising salesman and I was also the job-printing salesman (laughter), so I had quite a few jobs to do.

It was only a small little eight-page paper, but then we began expanding and I began working into community correspondence. So we would get news, little personals from each community, and that helped fill it up too. We did what every small-town newspaper should do and that was, as much as possible, to get names in the paper. That's what people want. In a small town they want to see their own name or they want to see what their friends are doing. They want to know what they're doing. On Kauai, somebody in Kilauea will have friends in, for instance, Kekaha which is about eighty miles away. They know each other and they've gone to school together, whatever it is, so there's a relationship that way too.

M: How much circulation did it have when you came?

F: Well, when we started it only had about 2000, some 1500, something like that. You see, originally it was pointed strictly at haoles, the English-reading community, which was at that time not much more than 1500 or 2000 people in entirety. We began pointing it at the second generation by improving the sports page which was what they were after, and also by getting people of that generation to write our community notes. So we were getting into the basic field which was some 34,000 other people. There were 36,000 people at the time [on Kauai].

So that began building our circulation up and it began building the interest in the paper up too. Previously it was just what you might say that so many small-town newspapers are: they tell you something that you know all about, that you've already heard. So then from there we began growing and it got to be a good moneymaker.

With the added circulation we were able to get more advertising because we could go in to a fellow and tell him, "Here, you have your store in this town here and we have 1000 in circulation here which means you have about 3000 readers as a rule." So we were able to really expand the paper. At the end I think we had about 8000 circulation sold out, which in reality represented practically every home on the island because there were 8000 homes according to the [1960] census. So we had expanded to that point.

M: That was in 1966, you said.

F: Yes, yes. And it's running now about 8,000. There's this sort of a ceiling on it, you see.

M: Oh. Do you still own the paper?

F: No, I sold out. I had this controlling interest in it and there were two or three offers made to me when they heard I was in the market to sell it. I wanted to retire and my son didn't want to take it over. So I asked him was it all right if we sold out and he said sure. We let it be known and we had several offers.

The final and best offer came from the firm that did buy it. They offered to buy out my shares of the company which gave them control. In thinking about it I felt that that wasn't fair to the other stockholders because that made them a minority stockholder in a firm that was controlled on the mainland. So I felt around among them and I asked them if they wanted me to approach them to buy us out lock, stock and barrel. And they felt yes. The majority of them--in fact, all of them did--felt that they would rather sell out than be a minority stockholder in a mainland corporation. I went back to the buyer and asked him if he were interested in buying us out and he said absolutely. He didn't want any minority stockholders; he'd rather have complete control. So then I made the negotiations. We sold out; everybody was sold out and they own it in its entirety now, you see--bought it out completely.

M: Did the same staff stay on though?

F: Yes. Well, they didn't keep everybody on. They had to make some changes. That was one of the provisions I made. Some of these people had been with me--when I sold out I'd been with the paper forty-two years--and I had some people who'd been there almost as long as I was, so I said that they were entitled to protection. They agreed to that. It so happened when they started reorganizing there, they got new equipment; they brought in brand new equipment which eliminated some jobs, you see. But they gave them a--there's a term for it when you close out, there's some kind of pay; you pay people off, or in proportion to what it is [severance pay]. But they kept most everyone.

And then what they did [was] they didn't want to be in the job printing business--it was strictly a newspaper outfit--so they sold the job printing plant to the employees that were working in it, you see. They formed a little company and bought it out. They were very generous. They were a good outfit to work with as far as I was concerned. So we sold out completely, you see, and that was it.

M: What's the name of the company?

F: It's the same company that runs the Waikiki Beach Press. It's the Scripps-Hagenon. If you know anything about the newspaper business, the Scripps family in Cleveland had a number of sons. This part of the family ended up in the Northwest and they own a chain of small papers and they're expanding all the time. It was part of the Scripps family but it wasn't connected with the Scripps operation in Cleveland. They own the big newspaper there called the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain which is United Press [International]. It was the third brother in this case. Then there's another brother that's involved with the Scripps Institute in San Diego in oceanography. It's all the same family. They're a fine outfit to work with.

We won some awards while we were there that I'm quite proud of. We got two awards. We belong to the California Newspaper Association. We weren't eligible; we were auxiliary members. They gave us an award one year for typography, for having one of the best printed papers, the best makeup, and the best news too.

But I think the finest compliment we got out of it [was when] the publisher of Time came down here; not [Henry Robinson] Luce but the man under him. I've forgotten his name now. [Roy Larson] He came down here one time and my son went down to interview him at the hotel to get a story on him. My son told him what he was there about and he said, "I've looked at your paper." He said to my son, "This is one of the finest small weekly newspapers I've ever seen, from typography and from news, particularly on the news angle."

We never ran a news story unless it referred to Kauai. We were the Kauai paper and even during the legislative session, if something happened there important, if Kauai was not involved in it we didn't run it because we didn't want to compete with the dailies [Honolulu Star-Bulletin and Honolulu Advertiser] or radio. We couldn't compete with them.

We only ran two world-breaking news stories. The first one concerned an intended flight to Hawaii that had a forced landing before they got here and they were missing ten days. That was Commander [John] Rodgers. He landed on Kauai so that made the association. The other story was [President Franklin Delano] Roosevelt's death because he died on our publication date. It was the days before daily newspapers were getting to the [outside] islands. They came by boat not by plane. We had plane service at that time but they were not dailies, so we ran that story because he died on the morning of our publication date. So we just took everything we could off the wire and we ran the story. Those were the only two world-wide stories

that we've ever run actually and given any play to.

Larson--Roy Larson was his name. He was the publisher at the time. I went down to see him afterwards. When he said that, I wanted to meet him. (laughter) He told me, he said, "It's one of the best weeklies I've ever seen."

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. . . their own problems, you see. We couldn't compete in any way, nationally and internationally, and made no attempt to do that. Now the other island weeklies did. They would give over space to stories that were international or whatever it is; they would give space to it. But in the meantime the daily papers would come in, of course with much better coverage. So we confined ourselves strictly to it [local news]. And then we went into local problems, you see what I mean.

M: Did you do any crusading for various things?

F: Yes. We tried to be objective as far as our news columns were concerned; we would try to tell both sides of the story. But editorially we would take a stand on it, on one side or the other. Good government was our [main concern].

We got in wrong with the plantations. We had a tremendous battle with one plantation. That was in the days of locomotives--hauling cane by locomotives--and the tracks crossed the road. We had had several near accidents with the train coming across without being flagged or anything else like that. And one night they did hit a car and fortunately killed no one but they put him in the hospital. So we had been crusading for these trains to stop. We said, "Sometime you're going to have a tough accident." So when this thing came out we reported the story objectively, straight, but in the editorial column I wrote about a dozen lines. I said if the plantation is not going to do this voluntarily [make the trains stop], then we will require action by the board of supervisors to make them do it. Boy, they just came down on us like a ton of bricks.

M: Isn't that funny? You'd think they wouldn't . . .

F: Well, it was a challenge to them. Unfortunately, the political boss of the island was also managing director of the plantation and he took offense at it. They ran the main store and they ran the theater . . .

M: Is this Lihue you're talking about?

F: In Lihue--Lihue Plantation. And they ran the main store

and the theater and they cut out all advertising [with our paper]. And they were our main source of revenue. But it got a reaction [all] over the island. By god, it was time somebody told Lihue Plantation. And this fellow [the manager] was in politics and he got this and so they eased back in again. And they found also that it was having an effect on their store and theater: on their attendance in the theater and their store's sales.

That was one crusade that we took and we took other crusades in the matter of good government. We were trying to get a harbor there for years. There was a local issue. Lihue Plantation had a harbor that they wanted to sell to the state but it wasn't adequate. We took the stand, along with everybody else on the island, that we wanted to build an adequate harbor; and we won out. It was quite a battle but fortunately, on this one, we had the biggest wheel in the island in our corner. (laughter) He was a big stockholder in American Factors; he was a director in American Factors. They didn't dare buck him, buck him through us, if you get my meaning. (chuckles)

M: Yes.

F: They didn't put any pressure on us; they didn't dare. All we would do is go over and tell Mr. [Gaylord Parke] Wilcox and he'd call up over there and tell them to be quiet.

So we weren't crusaders as such. I think that if something came up, we got behind it if we thought it was of benefit. One of the biggest things that we did in my book was go out and fight for our share of the tourist industry.

M: You mean . . .

F: Well, the outer islands were a stepchild, particularly in the first period after the war. Everything was concentrated here [in Honolulu]; all the control was here. That was one crusade that I did take up. I took it up not only editorially but I took it up as far as, I mean, actual working down here through the legislature and things like that. I was convinced the sole salvation of the outer islands [lay in tourism]. We couldn't say agriculture and growth [were] because there was a ceiling on sugar and there was a ceiling on pineapple and on the land you could use for it. I saw that the potential was in tourism and that was my avocation, well, since 1946 on. I mean it was an avocation with me. I think I have--with a lot of help from the other islands, we got in and finally convinced them here in Honolulu and through the legislature.

In those days the outer islands controlled the legislature. They had control of the Senate and they had con-

trol of the House. So if we couldn't sell an idea to the Hawaii Visitors Bureau, we could sell it to the legislature because these fellows had realized that this was their home island.

M: How did you go about pushing tourism for Kauai?

F: Well, the first thing we had to do was get facilities. We had to get people investing in hotels and things like that. What we had to do was promote tourism to the point where the present facilities couldn't handle it. Then the hotels or other people that were interested could see there was a need for it. And that was a long battle, I'm telling you. It took us a long time. We started in 1946 and we didn't get our second hotel until '52 and I don't think we got our third hotel till somewhere around '56 or '57. Then it came with a rush. We started out with about 24 rooms originally in one hotel and now it's 2400 or 2500. But we got up to a point where in the two hotels we had about 200 rooms or something like that and then we sort of stayed stagnant there for a while. And then as it began to build up other people came in and started buildings.

That was the toughest battle was to get the facilities. We got a good airport out of it; that was one thing it did. They realized we had to have a good airport if the tourist business was going to expand. We went ahead and had a good airport well ahead of anybody else in the outer islands. I think Maui for a long time didn't. In fact they were bypassed because they had no facilities at that time. They didn't have the airport use that we did. We had an excellent airport, well ahead of Maui, and an excellent terminal which is the main feature.

Then things began to go. It's made all the difference in the world on that island. Where it has made the biggest difference economically is that you can go into the Kauai Surf Hotel and you can go into Coco Palms or you can go to Sheraton-Kauai or any hotel over there, and you get to talking with the women working in the hotel and say, "How many children have you got?" And they'll say, "Well, I've got four or five." And how old are they?" "Well, I've got one that's twenty and one that's eighteen," or whatever. And then you say, "Where are they now?" And in nine times out of ten you will get an answer, "My oldest boy's in college," or "My oldest girl is in college." That's the biggest factor as far as I'm concerned.

It's given them the opportunity to send their kids to school that they didn't have before. Every time I go to Kauai particularly and I see a new girl, as far as I'm concerned--I know most of them, you see, I've watched them grow up--and I get to talking with her and I always ask: "Well, how many kids?" and I'll ask them, "How many in col-

lege?" and she'll say, "My boy's in college. My girl's in college. Now, I've got two in college". That's the biggest value as far as I'm concerned. It's given that generation a chance at an education that they wouldn't have had otherwise. I think that's the biggest factor; I think that's the important factor. Unfortunately, they don't come back because there's not too much opportunity, you see, for a college-educated kid, although some of them come back and teach school and things like that. A few come back--very few come back. They get different opportunities on the mainland and I think this . . .

M: That's the problem with tourism: it doesn't offer opportunities for more educated people as a rule.

F: It does, it does. That's mistaken, that. There are plenty of jobs in the top echelon but there has never been the proper training for it. You go here and you find a Swiss maitre d' or a Swiss chef and you'll find a mainland manager in most cases and you'll find all the assistant managers also come from the mainland.

M: Yeh.

F: Now at the University [of Hawaii] they have this school [Travel Industry Management] and that's going to fill that gap. At the time, if a kid wanted to go into the hotel business he went in there as a busboy or whatever it is and he didn't have enough background to move on up. Now he's got the busboy stage behind him if he goes to college, and he goes in at a level where he has an opportunity.

M: Yeh.

F: I think the biggest factor we have here in Hawaii is our people. If we can staff our hotels at the upper echelons with our people, we're going to be a lot better off. I just had a niece come down here and visit the islands just last month. She's traveled quite a bit. She came in and I sent her to the outer islands first. She landed in Hilo and went to Maui, then went to Kauai, and then came here. I wanted her to see the real Hawaii before she got to Honolulu. And the first thing she said to me, she said, "You've got such wonderful people and service here. Your waitresses, your room girls; everybody is interested in you." And of course, that is a big factor. It's being lost here in Honolulu I think as the newer elements are coming in. The oldtimers in the hotels still have it but I think the newer element is not so much interested. And that's our biggest factor here as far as competing with the rest of the world. If we ever lost that we'd just be another ordi-

nary tourist attraction.

M: Going back to your newspaper days, can you tell me anything about experiences you had with the people on Kauai or whatever?

F: Well (laughs), there were lots of times when we were unpopular, I can tell you that. We would take a stand that could be unpopular with a vocal minority. We had that experience. You soon learn in the newspaper business that a vocal minority does not represent public opinion. Too many people think that those who vocalize a lot on issues and stuff like that represent public opinion. That's a thing you have to analyze: who do they represent?

M: Like what sort of issues did you get into?

F: Well, we got into quite a hassle when they organized the ILWU [International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union]. That's one experience that I must admit that I was offbase too. I will say this: I opposed their methods because I knew that there was a communistic background in this thing. It was obvious: with Bridges' background it wasn't what he stood for in those days. [Harry Bridges, nee Alfred Renton Bridges, 1901- , Melbourne, Australia; founded ILWU in 1937, became the West Coast director of the Congress of Industrial Organizations--CIO. In 1955, after repeated attempts to have him deported as a Communist alien, the U.S. Justice Department dropped all charges against him.]

In my book, in the early days, he was more interested in communism than he was interested in helping the laboring man. I think that he was smart enough as he went along to see that the first one was unattainable and he would put his efforts into providing more things for the working man. And he--there's no doubt about it in my mind--he changed the economy of these islands by forcing the plantations to pay better wages. And he forced them to mechanize. To meet his scale they had to mechanize and so he made them improve their own economy while they were improving the lifestyle [of the working man]. There's no doubt in my mind that he has done [good things]. No matter his original motive was anything but that, see what I mean. And it worked out fine for everybody concerned that he was smart enough to see when one was unattainable to go after the other.

M: Well, what happened when the ILWU started organizing?

F: Well, they made mistakes in my book. For instance, the sugar plantations provided the power in the community and

they would picket the mill and they'd want to shut down the power plant. It was stupidity because they were cutting off their own source of power too. But it was things like that.

They created terrific tension in the community between the two elements too. It was the "damned Japs" and the "damned haoles"--it developed that feeling. But the end result in my book was worth it because the change that they made in the basic economy of the plantation laborer has benefited everybody else. I don't agree with everything they say, but basically the end result was good.

M: Mm hmm.

F: There's one thing that is to be said about it and that is Jack Hall. Jack Hall and I used to fight--I mean literally fight--everytime we saw each other because I was against what he was trying to do. I was against his methods as much as anything else. And he and I used to have debates--not actual formal debates where we would be at each other. But there's one thing that I have to say for him: that his word was good. When he committed himself, he committed himself. Now you can't say that about the rest of the labor leaders you meet.

M: Yeh, right.

F: They'll commit themselves but they'll have if, ands or buts. Anybody that's ever negotiated with Jack Hall will tell you. As I say, I hated his guts in those days because I thought he was destroying my world, you see. (chuckles) But anybody that ever negotiated [with him] will tell you, if he said yes that's all there was to it. It was yes. And there was never "if," "and," or "but," or "perhaps" or "I didn't mean that".

So that has been their plus factor I think, the fact that they had someone of his calibre. He was smart. But I think he was smart enough to see that it's the only thing you could do because if you lied this time, they'd never believe you again. Your credibility's gone. Once your credibility's gone, what can you do? But there are plenty of others here that haven't learned it.

M: Yeh. When you first came to the paper what sort of situation was there with. . . . Lihue Plantation was a big, powerful, obvious influence in the community.

F: The plantations ran politics. They ran the community; they ran the local politics; they ran the state politics, or the territorial politics in those days. It was strictly a paternalistic, feudalistic situation. And . . .

M: Where did you sort of fit into that?

F: Well, I felt that there was no substitute for good wages, you might say. It was a situation that developed. They didn't modernize as they went along. In my book, where the plantations lost out was during the war when we froze wages. We had martial law here during the war. You knew that. The military took over. The military froze wages and froze jobs, see, so if you were on a plantation and you were getting a dollar a day or whatever it was . . . . The dollar a day is a misnomer because most of it was on an incentive basis: if you did more work, you got more money. It was piecework, you might say. They called it contracts in those days. You got so much a ton for cutting cane and you got so much a ton for loading cane.

But the point was that on the plantation you had this fixed wage. If you were on a salary and your neighbor next door has gone to work for a contractor building an airport or building something else, well, he's up here getting twice as much or three times as much. So they didn't keep pace with that. They were making money and nobody had savvy enough or brains enough to go to the military and say, "Look." They gave them a profit-sharing bonus, but the fellow would rather see it in his paycheck than anticipate what he's going to get later, if you get my point. So they didn't give them a basic increase as the others did to keep pace with the others. I think they had a more difficult time organizing at the end of the war and following the time that they did organize. I think that was their big mistake.

M: Yeh. In other words, it sort of set them up for the . . .

F: Yeh, it set them up for a union, that's all. And another thing was that they weren't ready for it. They should have seen it coming. They were working at the time when the wages were frozen and of course they couldn't do anything because everything was frozen. They couldn't change any rates. They [the union organizers] were working among men, pointing out, "Well look! Here these fellows over here are making a dollar an hour; you're making a dollar a day." See?

M: Mm hmm.

F: And on that basis. So that was the big factor in labor work that they did. We, of course, always had our local crusades and our local politics and things of that sort.

M: Can you remember some good stories?

F: (chuckles) Oh well, there are a million of them.

M: Well, give me a few. (laughs)

F: How I had been fortunate when I first arrived on Kauai: five businessmen--five capable businessmen--four capable businessmen and one incapable Hawaiian, you might say, sat on the board, or it was something like that. So they ran it the way they would run their own business. It was a civic duty with them; it was not a political deal. They were just contributing to the community what they thought the community wanted to do. The result was that Kauai in those days had the reputation of being the best-governed and the soundest county financially in the territory. They were never in debt. They never spent any money until they could see how to spend it and they tried as much as possible [to stay] on a pay-as-you-go basis. They only sold bonds when it was obvious that this project had to be done and they couldn't build up a reserve to build it in time.

So it was a well-organized county. We had few, if any, problems in those days politically because taxes were low and the county wasn't overloaded with labor. One of the things they did do in communities like Hanalei where there wasn't any industry to employ anybody to any extent, they did carry more people on the payroll over there in that community. They did small jobs more. There were more people working on the road gang in Hanalei which had fewer roads than there were in the rest of the island, you might say. (chuckles) It was that rather than welfare and we had little or no welfare in those days. It was planned that way. So they did a good job.

But then politics began to come in and popularity began to [come in] and these fellows began to get beaten because they were known but they were not necessarily gregarious; they didn't get around much. They had their own business and this was a job they took over two days a month or something like that, and part time other times. The chairman of the board put a lot of time in. Then you began getting politics into it. That's when taxes began to go up and more people were loafing on the payroll. We knew over in Hanalei they were leaning on their shovels lots of times (chuckles) because there wasn't anything to do, but we knew it was either that or some form of welfare. So then when you get into politics, then you would take a stand. Somebody go out and promise them the world, he got elected. And then we'd [the paper] have to be on him to produce, see. So we had our hassles, we got plenty of them.

We had one chairman that was quite a problem. He was trying to build a machine so that he could run the county and it would be much to his benefit. He could make money

out of it under the table or whatever way it was. Anyway he was smart enough to know legitimate ways to make it and things like that. So we fought him. I think we fought him for about six years and finally licked him. And when he was defeated he moved to Honolulu. He came down here and somebody said to him, "Are you ever going to come back and run?" And he said, "Not unless Charlie Fern is dead." (laughter) That's the way he expressed it, you see.

But we made plenty of mistakes too, I think. Maybe we didn't anticipate the times. Our purpose was to try to keep them in line where the taxpayer was getting his dollar's worth. They'd add to the payrolls, you know, put their friends on and things like that--creating jobs. They had to to pay off their political debts and things like that.

There wasn't any graft as such, I mean, in any large amounts. I'm sure some of the fellows were getting contributions to their campaigns because they'd done a special favor. But there wasn't any huge amount. It wasn't a problem you might say; it was more petty larceny than anything else. And some of the boys ran a good county even under those circumstances.

Our problem on Kauai now is the man is stupid. I mean stupid; I mean, he doesn't know what it's all about.

M: When did the Portuguese element in Kauai really come to the fore?

F: Up to, I would say . . . (recorder turned off and on again)

M: . . . the Hawaiians were . . .

F: Yeh, Hawaiians called the shots but the dominating whites called the shots through the control of the Hawaiians, you see. The Hawaiians had the paid political jobs. The county attorney was a Hawaiian, you see, and the county treasurer was a Hawaiian and the county auditor at that time was a Hawaiian. So that was the control that they had.

And this fellow was on top and his brother was sheriff. Charlie [Charles Atwood] Rice was there; he was the dominant figure. He had complete control of all these others because he had enough control that he could defeat anybody he wanted to. You might get elected without his help but if he went out to get you, he could get you. But he ran a good county, I must admit that. He was ruthless, which every successful politician has to be as far as that's concerned.

END OF SIDE 2/1ST TAPE

BEGINNING OF SIDE 1/2ND TAPE

After this one fellow stepped down and retired he had a lot of people ambitious to succeed him. They were all types and they all made tries at it but I don't think today there's a boss on the island the way there was when he was there. You couldn't run for office if he didn't want you. I mean you could run, but he had a nucleus of votes there that you had to have. If he turned them against you--just like the ILWU now.

The ILWU on Kauai I say doesn't have more than twenty-five or thirty percent of the entire vote--twenty-five, I would say it's twenty-five. I mean, hard and fast ILWU. But you see, they can throw that one place to certain candidates. They'd throw it, then you get enough of the overflow and you'd get elected. If you start out without it, well, here's your opponent starting with twenty-five percent of the votes which makes it tough, you see. But there's plenty that have beaten them through ability or popularity or whatever it is.

The senator over there, he's retired now. He's one of the most capable men we've ever had in the legislature. He used to say there were only three ways to be sure of being elected on Kauai. Now, how did it go? Oh, the first was to be a Democrat; the second one was to get ILWU support; and the third was to be a Japanese. And he said, "I've only got one." (laughter) He was Japanese, you see, but he was elected purely because the bulk of the population realized his ability and his dedication to the job.

None of them were what you'd call serious battles, although they seemed serious at the time. (chuckles) But, well, we won some and lost some.

M: What about community-type things, not political so much?

F: Community what?

M: Community-type things. You know, human interest kind of stories.

F: Well, you've lost me on that one. I mean, just. . . . In what way? You mean . . .

M: Well, I mean just stories that you knew of or heard about that happened in your community. Nothing that would reflect badly on anyone; I don't mean anything like that but interesting stories about things that happened. (Mr. Fern's wife enters, says, "Community milestones or something.")

F: What's that?

M: Yeh. (Wife repeats: "Community milestones.")

F: Well, I don't know (chuckles)--I don't know where to start on that one.

M: Well, could you remember any from back when you first started on the paper?

F: (Wife: "That's something that'll just come flooding back to you.") Yeh, after you leave, I'll have a million of them.

M: Yeh. (recorder turned off and on again)

F: Kauai has been known for its independence for two reasons. The first reason is Kaumualii [Chief of Kaua'i], you see, to go back to Kamehameha. Kamehameha never conquered him. The one reason he never conquered him is because he never really set out to conquer him. He came into Oahu here after he conquered--he set up here and he was going to take Kauai, which was still the only outpost against him. And he brought his army here.

He brought so many. I don't know how many; in those days I think a big army was maybe ten or fifteen thousand and relatively that was a big army. He brought them here and they were a burden on the community. They ate everything up, they didn't produce anything and the result was there was a cutback in food. There was a cutback in diet and things and his army got scurvy and he couldn't set off. This was something new that I just learned by reading a Russian book--a book on Russia in Hawaii, you see.

The old story on Kauai is--there's two stories on Kauai. One story which is completely untrue was that he came there and landed and when he landed his army, he'd had a very rough trip across the channel and they were exhausted. The first unit got in and the Kauai army got on and slaughtered them and the rest never came. The rest never landed because some of them escaped and got back and he turned back. That's completely untrue. I mean that's a local legend but it's not true. Then the other story is that he started twice and that both times he ran into heavy weather in the channel between there and he turned back.

Well, then this Russian says that actually why he didn't go was because when he got his fleet together to go, they had the scurvy and most of his force was down with scurvy. The result was when he did annex--there was an annexation, he made an agreement--he left him alone. He left Kaumualii alone. But the Americans were afraid of the Russians on there and they told Kamehameha, "You've got to get rid of Kaumualii and the Russians or you're going to have problems with the Russians." They didn't want the

competition. So then they [the Americans] went over and convinced Kaumualii that he better join up or else they would bring Kamehameha's army over in their [the American] ships. Then he expelled them, and Kamehameha made a treaty with him that the survivor would be the king--there were two branches. Then Kaumualii came down to visit, to discuss it with him and oddly enough Kaumualii died (chuckles) very mysteriously while he was here.

M: Oddly enough. (chuckles)

F: Oddly enough. Then, you see, Kamehameha took over. He used to send up governors from here. He would send up a governor--I don't know whether he had any troops or not--but he would send up his man as governor.

Well, it's an easy trip downwind to Kauai, but it's a long trip back because you beat back against the wind all the way. So it was easy to get to but difficult to get back from, so communication wasn't very good. And so this governor sat up there and if he got into any problems he could expect little or no help from down here. So pretty soon he joined them (chuckles); figured if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. And so Kauai was independent in that period.

Then when the sugar period came in, the situation developed [that] all the Kauai plantations were home-owned. And the agencies down here, they worked for them, not the plantations working for the agencies. And if they didn't like it--if the plantation on Kauai didn't like what the agency was doing--in fact, they told them to go to hell, you see, because they were working for them [the plantations]. That gave a degree of independence. Kauai settled its own problems. Honolulu didn't tell them what to do, so I think that's one big factor. And, of course it doesn't mean much today, but there's still that idea, "Well, we're Kauaians, we're different." So I think that's one factor of the two. There's that element of a little more cohesion or a little more--I don't know what it is. So we're not as factional although we do have what they call east side-west side.

M: What's that?

F: Well, the island is divided by this range that runs down and it isn't too high but there's a pass through it. One side's the east side and one side's the west side. Well, the county seat's in the east side so the west siders claim the east side runs the island. (chuckles) I think before automobiles, when transportation was a horse and buggy, it probably was a factor but now it's gone. But there's still a little feeling all along that west side, you know: "These durn east siders are always trying to tell us what to do,"

and things like that, but it isn't to the same extent because it's pretty well working.

It's a good place to live. There's quite a little pride in it, in being there, and it isn't as cliquey as some of the other islands are in my experience. I feel it's a nice place. It's been a wonderful place to live.

M: Who are some of the people that have worked for you and how did you come across them? Were they local people?

F: Well, let's see. I've got it here. Mary Cooke worked for us. You know who Mary Cooke is.

M: Yeh. [Mary Moragne (Mrs. Samuel Alexander) Cooke]

F: She was a girl there. She lived over there and she got her start in the newspaper business with us, you see. She was out of high school and looking for a job, something to do. She was living with her mother and her aunt so she came to us.

M: You said some of the people had been with you almost as long as you were there.

F: Yes. In fact, there's a superintendent who's still up there who used to work for me. He retires pretty soon. I hired him as a boy of sixteen as an apprentice. When I retired when we sold out, there were four employees on the list who were not under our pension plan because they had too much service. We had a pension plan, an organized pension, and you can do two things. You can buy in the pension plan for them, which costs you a lot of money to bring them up to date, or you can carry them seperately and then make a settlement when they retire. We had four. At the time they retired, two of them had almost forty years and two others had over thirty years.

M: Were these local people?

F: Yeh, all local. Practically everybody we had was local. We went out a couple of times. We went out once to get a shop superintendent before this fellow was ready. Once we had to get two. Then we brought in one or two editorial people. In fact, the other two are with the paper now.

Mrs. Fern used to run the women's section, you see. She wanted to get out of it so we brought this gal in to take her place, then she went on. Then my son [Charles J., Jr. (Mike)] stayed on as editor. He was editing the paper. He stayed on with it, but he found out that working for his father and working for a firm that has headquarters on the mainland were two different things because I never ques-

tioned his judgement as far as costs were concerned. If he decided he had to pay somebody overtime to do an important job or two or three jobs, why, I never questioned it.

Well, they started doing this, you see. Why is this overtime necessary? They were wondering because maybe there'd be something very important before the board of supervisors which was a terrific fight--they knew would be a terrific battle. And he'd send a photographer and a reporter if he couldn't cover it himself. He generally covered it himself but if there were two things coming up and he had to send another reporter out, you see, they didn't like the overtime. And it wasn't intelligent because his publisher asked him, "Why don't you get the details; why do you have to send somebody to this meeting? If you're tied up with something, why can't you get the minutes of the meeting?" He tried to tell them you can't write a story of what happened at the meeting from the minutes because the fights (laughs) are not in the minutes at all. So we used almost entirely local people.

M: When did your son take over as editor? [1953]

F: He worked during the war. He had poor eyesight; he couldn't go in the service. He worked during the war for--they had a Foreign Broadcast Listening Service. You ever know what that was?

M: No.

F: They used to listen to short wave. They listened to Germany and Japan and all the enemy countries--what they were doing. And they'd compile all this and it would give an insight into what they were thinking or what they were doing. They'd analyze what they were pointing out, the area they wanted to go or whatever it was, and they got a lot of information from that. He worked as an editor on that.

The story he tells--he says they found out where the Japanese were getting their source of important metals or minerals or something they used in the war that they had to have, and they would blockade it. They had no other source. I think it was the lead for their high octane in the gas. They found out how they got that. They heard a broadcast that the emperor had gone up to a certain place to decorate two technicians who had done a great job or whatever it was--they didn't say what it was, you see. They finally found out that that was the lead mine, a lead mine that they had developed. That's how they found the target because they were wondering where they were getting their octane.

It was things like that. They also could follow the

trend of propaganda. What does this mean? They're pointing towards this. It would give them a lead into what they were anticipating. He worked at that, then when he came back he worked for us a while, then he came down and worked for the [Honolulu] Advertiser. Then he went to the mainland, then he came back and worked for us again and was editor. Then he came down and worked for the [Honolulu Star-] Bulletin and then he went to the mainland. Now he's in Los Angeles. I can tell you this little story.

M: Let me see how much tape I have. (recorder turned off and on again)

F: This is the way they used to vote in the early days. They passed a law against it, but what they would do in the precincts: the plantations would give a luau and invite all the men. Only the men in those days. Only the men could vote. They'd bring all the men down and have a big luau and give them some beer 'cause nobody else had beer in those days. And from there they would march in formation to the polls (laughter) and they'd hand them a marked ballot and they'd all go in and vote. (laughter) That was one of the ways of controlling them, you see.

M: Were they still doing that when you were there?

F: No, they wiped that out. It was used, I think, in the days of the monarchy when they were elected and they would elect legislators. The legislature was elected. The Senate, I think, was appointed. The king appointed the Senate. Then when they got into territorial voting they carried it over. (laughter) Mainland officials began to come to our governor and particularly the judges because they were wondering what's going on here (laughter), so they passed a law against that.

This fellow said, "The first time I saw them, really it was a kick to see them all get in and have this big luau and everybody feeling fine, then they'd get into formation and march to the polls." (laughter) They'd all be given a sample ballot--how to vote. They'd either take it in the box or else they'd vote for that one. I don't know which was which. But that was one of the things that went on. The Hawaiians were good politicians and I mean they enjoyed it. It was a sort of avocation to them too.

M: How did you meet your wife [Mary Lucille Gillespie Fern]? You met her here?

F: I think she better tell you that story. (laughs) Is she here or is she gone?

M: I think she's gone.

F: Very well. She had a friend down here, living here. A gal that she went to college with was married and living down here. She [my wife] was supposed to be on her way to Australia with her aunt and uncle on a trip and she was going to meet them here on the steamer. She came down ahead to visit her friend and she [her friend] lived on Kauai so she came over to see her friends. Then in the interim her aunt and uncle who were supposed to go had to cancel. Something had happened and they didn't come. So she came to visit this gal.

This gal came to see me a couple of days before New Year's. She said, "I'd like to have you come to dinner at our place New Year's Eve and go to the New Year's Eve dance." I said okay. But I had to tell her that I couldn't come to dinner because I had been kicking about the food we'd been getting in this plantation boarding house where I was working and we had finally gotten the new cook and this was his first meal. He was to start work that night for our New Year's Eve dinner and I said, "I'm responsible for this guy, I'd better be there and see what happens." (chuckles) And I said I had to be there because it's going to be a big party anyway. I said, "I won't come to dinner but I'll meet you later at the dance." Well, that was fine.

Well, she got in that day, came in that morning on the boat. So I went in to the dance, where the dance was and it hadn't started yet. Another fellow and I went in his car and we went in and the dance hadn't started yet and they weren't there. So we said, "Well, let's take a look. There's a dance over on the other side of the island about twenty miles. Let's go over and see that one, see what's doing over there." So we went over there and got held up over there having a good time. So I got back about ten or half past ten to keep my date with her. (chuckles) What had happened to her: she was so tired and everything, but she stayed out till about ten, or whatever it was, and then prevailed on her hostess that she would rather go home. (chuckles) And she left. So when I got there she was gone. So she always tells everybody I stood her up on our first date. (laughter) Then I met her afterwards.

And I have a story that I tell about her. She stayed on to teach school, see. This is a little fairy tale. And I said that when she was in the teachers' cottage--I still hadn't met her--I called up the teachers' cottage one night and asked for Miss Gillespie. Miss Gillespie came to the telephone and I said, "Miss Gillespie?" and she said, "Yes." I said, "Miss Gillespie, would you like to go to the movies tonight?" and she said, "Yes, who's calling?" (laughter) That's my story for her, for standing her up, see.

She stayed there and taught. She went to Maui and taught a year and then came back and we were married. I think it was about a year and half or something. She wanted to see Maui or whatever it was. I don't know whether she wasn't sure whether she wanted to get married or not. (laughter) Anyway she went over there and then came back and then we've lived on Kauai ever since.

M: What year were you married?

F: 1922. We have our golden wedding [anniversary] next year.

M: Wow. Where did you live; did you live in Lihue?

F: We lived in Lihue, yes. It was a house. We had to provide our own housing at first. We were very lucky. We rented, we didn't build. One of the plantations owned the telephone company too, and that was before it was part of Hawaiian Telephone. Then they had built a house for the telephone company manager. I was living in another house. One manager came up--it was a big house--and it was just himself and his wife. She didn't want to take care of a big house so they got a smaller house and that left this one open.

So we moved into that and that was our home. In fact, we were paying such low rent on it, it never paid us to build a house. In fact, the banker tried to sell me a house, or a mortgage to build a home, and when I told him what rent I was paying--I had a three-bedroom house with two baths and an additional shower off the back lanai to clean up as you came in, you know, working in the garden you could take a shower right there. It was three bedrooms, huge lanai, huge living room and I was paying sixty-five dollars a month, see. So I told him, I said, "Frankly, I can't afford to build a house." And he told me, "Well, you certainly can't." See, I couldn't own a house over . . .

M: Well, how did you manage to live on plantation housing? After you didn't work for them, you stayed there?

F: Well, this had been built, you see, for the telephone company manager. There were a number of factors involved. The telephone company manager didn't take any care of it and where we were living we were taking care and that helped too, you see. In fact, when we moved in--this was on the Wilcox property on Kauai--and we'd been there a while, maybe five or seven or ten years, they thought about raising the rent. Miss Wilcox said, "Don't raise the rent because they might move out (laughter), and we'll have another guy that won't take care of the place the same as he does."

That's why our rent was never raised. She was afraid that we wouldn't have stayed. (laughter)

M: Wow. Sixty-five dollars a month.

F: Oh, it was fantastic. It was fantastic then, but it was the going rate for this telephone company. And then this went on and on. We had about three acres of land. Fortunately yardmen were cheap in those days. We couldn't afford it now, to take care of it, but yardmen were cheap and we had all this land. Oh, we had a huge area. In fact, part of it we let grow up just not to take care of it. Just tried to keep the grass down to a degree but not really put in a lawn or anything else like that. We had a huge lawn all around the house.

M: This was right in Lihue?

F: Well, have you been to Kauai at all?

M: Yeh.

F: Well, you know where the high school or the community college is?

M: Kind of vaguely. I haven't a very good impression of the city because we sort of avoided it while we were there.

F: Well, we were across the valley from the town itself. When you go to the west side, when you go to Koloa or Waimea or Waimea Canyon . . .

M: Uh huh.

F: Just after you get out of the town you turn left and go back towards the sea. Lihue's here and there's a valley here and we were over here.

M: Oh, I see.

F: Part of the Grove Farm Plantation. It was their property. [Grove Farm is a sugar plantation in Lihue started in 1864 by George N. Wilcox, son of missionaries Abner and Lucy Wilcox.]

M: You must have known the [William Patterson] Alexanders.

F: Oh, very well, yes. If you knew where the Alexanders lived, we lived quite close to them.

M: I don't know, but I was just talking to her the other day.

F: Well, it's pretty hard if you don't know Lihue. I mean you've just been through the town.

M: Yeh, we stayed out at Poipu.

F: Well, when you leave Lihue to go to Poipu, just after you pass the sugar mill--you remember that?

M: Yeh, yeh.

F: You turn left as the road turns left from the main road. That goes to our place and goes right back down to the sea again. It's just a loop around this valley, that's what it is, see? It's a nice place to live. At first it was very quiet but then they built the access road to the wharf from the west side down that way so that all the sugar trucks came down that way. So there was a lot more traffic than when we first moved there. It was just an access road when we first went there, then when they built this road for the sugar trucks to come from the west side . . .

END OF SIDE 1/2ND TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

SECOND INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES JAMES FERN

At his Arcadia apartment, 1434 Punahou Street, Honolulu, 96822

September 17, 1971

F: Charles James Fern

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

M: Is that working? Yeh.

F: I was director of civilian defense on Kauai during the war [1940-45].

M: You were?

F: Yeh. You got it going?

M: Yeh, mm hmm.

F: There was a case where I was on the inside, on privileged information, and yet I was sworn to complete secrecy on it.

M: So you couldn't . . .

F: And I was afraid that I'd inadvertently let it out sometime. One case was during the Battle of the Coral Sea, which was in the early part of the war as I recall it now. They knew something was cooking but they couldn't find one task force--a Japanese task force. They knew they were going south, you see. And I ought to say here the Americans had broken the Japanese radio code so they knew what they were sending every time they sent it. That was one of the big features in the war. And, of course, it was a well-kept secret too. But they had broken it so they knew what they were doing.

So they knew that this Coral Sea thing was on but they couldn't find one task force. They were maintaining radio silence and they couldn't locate them or anything else like that. They didn't know where they were. And they thought maybe there was going to be a feint here at Hawaii. And [with] the big battle down there the thing was to do whatever they could with our forces to protect Hawaii. This was all supposition, you see.

I was told by the commanding general--I wasn't given too much detail on it, but I was told by the commanding general to be on the alert, and keep my organization on the alert, that something might happen. I wasn't given any specific information; I was just put on a personal alert, as far as that was concerned. So there I was giving people orders and telling them what to do and not being able to explain to them why. (both chuckle) And what I was afraid of was that I would inadvertently let something out. That was a rather trying experience.

It was a similar thing on the Battle of Midway too. They knew that the Japanese fleet was going to Midway and the American fleet went up there to intercept them, all because they'd broken this code, see, and they knew where they were going. So the fleet went up there to intercept them and, of course, that's getting close to home too.

And in that case again submarines, you see, were watching them, wherever they left from. They had that sort of surveillance, or at least they were supposed to, but they couldn't find them. They couldn't find one task force in the early part. I think it turned out eventually to be the one that went to Dutch Harbor as a feint, went to Alaska. It attacked Dutch Harbor so they ended up there, but they thought maybe they were coming this way. So again, I knew something big was cooking but I didn't know what. But I was just told that I had to be sure my organization was ready for any possibility.

M: How long were you the director?

F: I was it the whole war.

M: How did you come to be chosen or asked to be it?

F: Well, in those days the mayor of the island set up a committee on each island. And I was asked by the mayor to head up Kauai's Civil Defense organization. Then, of course, when the war broke we went immediately under the military governor; we were under his direction. It was a purely local organization.

Our mayor, or chairman as they used to call him in those days, was a fellow named William Ellis. He was well ahead of his contemporaries when this thing came. Then the legislature got into it and they set up--still using the same organization, they set up a state-wide organization. But each county organization was under the mayor, you see what I mean. Then they didn't pull them in until the war actually started.

So I was selected by him. And one of the highlights of this thing is that we realized--we got a lot of help from the local army on it too--we realized that communica-

tions was going to be one of our main problems, so we set up a communication force by use of telephone primarily. We had five districts offices. There were five supervisors' districts in those days on the island, so we set up by the same method. Then we had a communications center in each one of these districts and then we were training these people in how to handle communications. We wanted everything in writing. If it was official everything would be in writing, to be taken down by hand and written out, not word of mouth at all if it was to go anyplace. The big payoff of this was that on December 7, 1941 (chuckles), we set up a communication exercise. (chuckles)

M: You mean you just happened to the same day [as the attack on Pearl Harbor]?

F: That day. (laughs)

M: Oh no.

F: And the result was that we had everybody alerted when the thing came; we had everybody alerted to go to work that day. Those that were in [our Civil Defense group] had all made plans [for this exercise] so we just went right to work on that when we knew the war was on.

We didn't believe it on Kauai at first for a number of unusual factors. One of them was that only one radio station carried it. What happened on that one--I don't know whether this is beside the point or not, but it's good copy, see--but what happened was that on the morning that thing broke there were only two radio stations on Oahu. There was one in Hilo, one on Kauai and two in Honolulu. When it broke, KGMB got the alert. They got it. I don't know how they got it; they got it not by chain of command or anything, just because somebody saw it. And that's how they got it.

As far as KGU was concerned--that was part of the Advertiser then--they didn't get any word. And the result was that the fleet was in and the circulation man for the navy yard was down at the navy yard. By a coincidence that day there was a breakdown in the Advertiser press. The editor was down to see what was wrong. It was purely coincidence; it wasn't sabotage or anything else, purely coincidence. And while he was in the press room waiting to see when they were going to get the paper running, the phone rang and it was the Advertiser's circulation man in Pearl Harbor. With the fleet in he had a tremendous amount of papers down there.

He called up and he told him, he said, "Mr. [Raymond] Coll," who was the editor, "all hell's broken loose in Pearl Harbor." He said, "What do you mean?" He says,

"The Japs are attacking Pearl Harbor." And Mr. Coll said, "Have you been drinking or something? What's wrong with you?" "Well," he said, "listen." So then he could hear the bombs in the background, the firing and the bombs in the background. So he immediately said okay and he called the radio station.

It's a Sunday morning and the man on duty in the radio station was a Chinese boy, an engineer. Everything was tape recorded or everything was recorded for him--all his announcements. All he did was keep it [going] early Sunday morning [when] nothing's doing. So Mr. Coll called him and said, "Get on the air. The Japs are attacking Pearl Harbor." .And the boy--this was a new one on him; he wasn't supposed to go on the air. So he called up the manager of the station who lived up in Manoa someplace and told him, he said, "Mr. Coll has just called me and said the Japs were attacking Pearl Harbor. What am I to do?" (laughter) So the manager says, "Hold everything till I get there." (laughter)

So I guess he got up and had breakfast, had a shave and everything like that. (laughs) So here we had the situation with one station, KGMB, just saying, "This is the real McCoy, we're not fooling, this is it," and the other station placidly playing the "Blue Danube Waltz." (laughter)

So the way I got into it was that there was a man from Washington who was here in the islands and I knew him. He was a newspaperman from Washington and he was coming up to Kauai to speak to the Chamber of Commerce on Monday night, which was the next night, at a meeting. So the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce called me and said, "Have you heard from this man, your friend? Have you heard from him?" and I said no. And he said, "Oh, where's he staying?" and I said he was at the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel]. He said, "Why don't you give him a ring and see if everything is all set?" I said, "Sure." He said, "By the way, have you listened to the radio?" and I said no. "Well," he said, "there must be some kind of alert on in Honolulu." And I said, "What?" and he said, "Yeh, well, they're telling all the first aid people to report and stuff like that."

It just happened that the week or two before, the top director of O.C.D. [Office of Civilian Defense] was on Kauai and he was talking about his own plans and he said, "Don't be surprised if some Saturday or Sunday morning we'll put on an alert to see how fast we can get our organization together." He said, "That's in the plans."

Well, here was this [Chamber of Commerce secretary telling me about this alert in Honolulu] and I said, "Oh, that's just an alert." (chuckles) "Well," he said, "it's on there [the radio]." So I tuned on the radio and I get all this excitement on KGMB: "Everybody report for first aid; doctors get out to Pearl Harbor," and all this stuff

like that. And I turned over to KGU to see what they had and they had, as I say, the "Blue Danube Waltz". (laughter) So I [said], "Aw, that's just an alert."

So I made my call down here [to the Royal Hawaiian] and I couldn't get him. He was out. But the hotel was just working and going on normally. Well, they're sorry. "We know they're in the building because the girl said they just phoned out a minute ago," and whatever it was. So I didn't pay any attention.

My son used to have a Sunday morning news program. He would listen to shortwave. The war was on, you know. Well, he'd listen to shortwave, then he'd write it up and then go down and put it on the air. And he was ahead of the other papers on any flashes and things like that. So he was doing this and he called me up and he said, "Say, Dad, there's [something] cockeyed here. We're getting all kinds of calls about an attack on Pearl; something's doing in Honolulu. What's in it?" I said, "Oh, they're just having an alert, Mike." I said, "That's all [it is]. I checked." I called army headquarters and I said, "Have you fellows got any alert on?" Kauai army headquarters. You see, they had troops on Kauai. No, no, they had nothing. I said, "Well, nothing cooking?" No, not at all. (laughter) So I told Mike, "Forget it."

I was at home and he said, "You better come on down here and answer this phone and get on the air yourself. I'm tired of going on and telling them it's an alert. And everybody tells me I'm crazy." So I went down and I went on and said, "Now, as far as we can understand, this is an alert in Honolulu, nothing to be concerned about." I'd told the army, "If you hear anything, [let me know]." So I just got through with this and the commanding officer whom I couldn't find--no, wait a minute.

My son went home. He said, "Well, I'm going to go home and see what's cooking." He called me up about ten or fifteen minutes later. He said, "Dad, you better get on the air. (chuckles) I'm listening to Australia right now--shortwave--and Australia says that London says that Washington says that the Japs have attacked Pearl Harbor." (laughter) So that's the way we got it. And just about that time the commanding officer came in and told me, he said, "Well, you've been asking is anything going on. Yes, there is." (laughter) So that's how we found out about it.

Then, of course, with that we were on the air. And then the point was they took all our radio stations off the air but they forgot about us. (laughs) We stayed on (laughter), broadcasting. You see, they took them off [the air] because they could use it as a beacon. If they had another force coming in they could use the radio signal as a beacon to come in on. And they forgot all about us. (laughter) We were using ours to alert. So I just went

on the air and said, "Everybody report to your stations. Everybody. This is the real McCoy." In fact, I told them first they'd attacked--I didn't want to announce it too fast--I said that they've attacked Manila, which they had at that time too. I thought we'd create a panic if we said they were hitting Pearl Harbor. Then later we went on that Pearl Harbor was attacked too.

So we got everything all alert and everything going. (laughter) And the best thing was we had our communication unit. Oh, they were working full blast. We'd had a couple of practice sessions but this was the first island-wide one. We'd had little ones in each unit but this was the first time [for all the units together]. We'd planned this one to run a bunch of messages through and see how they were handled and they went to work on it. But it was quite a time.

M: Isn't that strange how things just didn't . . .

F: Well, you couldn't believe it. How could you believe it, hearing one fellow holler and one fellow--Webley Edwards was on KGMB and he kept saying, "This is the real McCoy, I'm not fooling." Well, I never heard him say that. I didn't get that far. But I heard him say, "All right, all first aid people report to your stations. All doctors, you're wanted; report in. There you'll be assigned where to go." They wanted all the surgeons out at Pearl Harbor in their hospital and things like that. So I thought this was just an alert, just a nice practice alert.

M: Wow. (chuckles)

F: We had set up an organization, as I say, and as a result I think we were--our chairman had set ours up even before the legislature got into it. He thought it would be a good idea to get one going. Then the legislature came in and they financed it to a degree. And they set up a state-wide one but using the county ones that had been put into operation.

M: Wow, that's a terrific story.

F: We had one thing that I'm very proud of as far as Kauai's concerned. We never had a single fatality during the black-outs and everything else like that. Every island had some-body killed--through a mistake, or somebody thought that he shouldn't be there or whatever it was and they were shot at--all through just errors, you see. The idea was that they thought he was someone or he didn't answer a challenge, something like that. We were lucky. We didn't have one single casualty. And it was partly due to some of

the training that we'd done before.

The first night that the radio station was off the air, [Brigadier] General [Kendall Jordan] Fielder, who was chief of intelligence, called me about three o'clock in the afternoon. (chuckles) He forgot all about us. And he said, "Charlie, get that goddamned station of yours off the air. (laughter) You're supposed to get off the air." And I said, "Well, nobody told us." And he said, "I know, but you're told now." So we got off.

I went down that night [to the station]. We set up guards every place. This was all part of our plan, you see. Frankly, we were afraid of sabotage; we didn't know. And so we had guards at all the power plants and we had guards at the radio station. Oh, we had guards at every wide place in the road because we had so many people recruited for us. (chuckles) So I went down to the radio station this night and, of course, it was all blacked out. We were using it as a headquarters too, you see. We had another headquarters but we were using this one too.

I went down to see what was going on because they were listening to shortwave and we were trying to get information. As I drove up to the gate of the radio station--as I went down the main street to it--I got about a hundred yards away from the gate into it and a man challenged me: "Halt! Who's there?" I told him, "Charlie Fern." And he said, "Dismount from your car and advance to be recognized." (chuckles) I did and he went back and he said, "All right, Mr. Fern. You can go in now," and I went in. And when I came out I told this fellow--I knew him and I said, "That's the way to do it." I said, "Don't let anybody get close to you at all. Anybody comes in here, if you see anybody, you challenge them and you make them stand fast." And then I said, "You make him advance to you so you can keep him covered all the time. Don't you advance to him." And he said, "Yes, sir; yes, sir."

So about the second night I went down to the radio station again and drove right up to the gate. And this fellow says, "Halt! Who's there?" and I said, "Charlie Fern." And he came out and looked at me and he said, "Oh yes, Mr. Fern. Okay." And I said to him, "Ambrose, that's a mistake. You let me get right up on top of you first. You came up and challenged me instead of you making me dismount and see if my hands were clear. I could have had a gun here." "Well," he says, "Mr. Fern, it's all right. Alfredo's right behind the hedge there with a shotgun pointed at your head." (laughter)

M: What kind of stories did you get in your paper out of this?

F: Well, they put all the telephones--inter-island telephones--on censorship. You couldn't call without identifying your-

self. That was all censored. They had no radio stations in Honolulu. The two radio stations were off the air. The only news we could get was from the coast at night on radio; we could get the mainland on the outer islands. You can't do as well on Oahu because these mountains block it off but on the outer islands we have a straight shot at the mainland and we got good reception. So all we knew . . .

M: You mean on your regular shortwave thing?

F: No. Long wave at night, and shortwave in the daytime.

My son was monitoring--with his radio equipment he was monitoring shortwave and getting information that way, but you couldn't send any inter-island communication at all. It had to go through censorship. And so all we got was what we could get from the mainland. And, of course, they were censoring everything out of Honolulu to the mainland so it wasn't very complete. They'd stopped all airplanes; there was no mail, so there was nothing. We were just sitting here and, as I said, the only thing that we knew was going on was what we could get from the mainland.

So then finally I called--we had a newspaper coming out on Tuesday I think it was, and I called General Fielder then and I told him, "We don't know what in the world is going on here. We're really in the dark completely." So he said, "Well, what do you want to do?" And I said, "Let UPI or AP send us a file of what they're sending or what they did send to the mainland. Or have the [Star-] Bulletin or somebody pick it up and send us the local side, what's happened locally that hasn't appeared on the wire service," because there'd be a lot of those things. I mean like the identification of any casualties wouldn't be on the mainland wire file but it would be in the Honolulu paper that so-and-so was killed or how many were killed--of the local casualties. There were a number of local casualties, you see.

So he did. He had the Star-Bulletin fix up a story for us, or one of the press services fix up a local story for us. And then we put that in the paper. We couldn't go on the air; we were off the air too. So we put that in the paper and that's the first information we had actually of what happened.

M: How much later was that then that it got out in the paper?

F: That was on Tuesday. We got it out Tuesday afternoon. Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon. I've forgotten now. We used to print on Tuesdays then we changed to Wednesdays and it was either one of those two days that we got it out.

Then we started a little daily service and we got out

a little daily paper. And we just broadcast it. It was a boxholder's deal. We sent it to each post office. It was a public service job as far as we were concerned. Every day these would go out. Then when we got down to where things were getting back to normal we used it for all the military governor's directions and all the--everything. This little daily paper carried all the information about new rationing procedures and things like that. And we ran the weekly paper for all the other news but we got out this little daily every day, every afternoon, and it'd be in the mail the next morning. So that brought them up to date if there were any new orders: blackout hours were changed or any new blackout regulations.

M: Well, did you get your information then from Honolulu?

F: Yeh. We got a regular file from the press service. UPI sent us a regular file. From that, and we would get the daily news. And also we would pick up from the mainland or anything like that we would pick up on shortwave too what was there. But the local news came in every day; that is if it was of any importance. We would get a file on that every day. Then pretty soon they got the planes running again, although we still had censorship on the telephones. All the calls were monitored between the islands on the possibility that they could be picked up or something.

M: Was there much feeling towards the Japanese in your community?

F: Well, we had anticipated that and we had done something about it on Kauai. See, I never anticipated any local attack, you get my point, but I was afraid that if we did go to war with Japan then there would be a friction against the Japanese and feelings would show in that way. And I was afraid of two things. I was afraid of somebody egging on people, see, and I was afraid of some over-patriotic elderly Japanese, first generation Japanese, getting full of sake some night and giving a banzai or something, you see what I mean.

So we set up what we called a Morale Committee. We put a very, very akamai or smart Episcopal minister as head of it just because we figured that he would have some compassion too in handling things. Then we put a Catholic priest on and a Filipino minister; we had three. Then we had others on it. But these three, these were our three areas, you see. The Filipinos could be--they're very quick on the trigger and we were afraid--this is between us what I'm going to say now. (recorder turned off and on again) And it turned out that way, you see. There was that possi-

bility, especially after Manila was attacked, and so the way we handled that--we handled it very nicely, you see. Any time we heard of any of this group getting noisy, we turned it over to the priest and he was a very positive person. He just went over and told them to keep their big mouths shut. So we didn't have any problems in that way.

We had brought the young Japanese into this Morale Committee and we told them our problem--where we thought it was going to be, what we were afraid of. So they had done quite a bit of work trying to educate their people, particularly their first generation, that if anything happened that they could upset the apple cart.

Well, it was island-wide, as you know. There was no sabotage and there was nothing of the kind at all, so we didn't have any problem that way. We had Japanese working in O.C.D. just right along as backups. One night, I think about a month after the war was on, I got a call at my home from our communications center in Lihue--our headquarters. The fellow on duty was a Japanese boy--well, a young man--and he called me up and said, "Mr. Fern, I'm in a bind here." And I said, "What's up?" "Well," he said, "there's an army lieutenant colonel comes in here and wants to know what am I doing in this place (laughter) and he told me to get out. I tried to tell him I'm in charge."

END OF SIDE 1/3RD TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

Retranscribed and edited by Linda I.L. Tubbs

Audited and edited by Katherine B. Allen

NOTE: Lynda Mair notes that the tape on SIDE 2/3RD TAPE got tangled and the next thirty minutes of recording were lost.

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THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In May 1971, the Watumull Foundation initiated an Oral History Project.

The project was formally begun on June 24, 1971 when Katherine B. Allen was selected to interview kamaainas and longtime residents of Hawaii in order to preserve their experiences and knowledge. In July, Lynda Mair joined the staff as an interviewer.

During the next seventeen months, eighty-eight persons were interviewed. Most of these taped oral histories were transcribed by November 30, 1972.

Then the project was suspended indefinitely due to the retirement of the foundation's chairman, Ellen Jensen Watumull.

In February 1979, the project was reactivated and Miss Allen was recalled as director and editor.

Three sets of the final transcripts, typed on acid-free Permalife Bond paper, have been deposited respectively in the Archives of Hawaii, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii, and the Cooke Library at Punahou School.